

The Importance of Home Language

A Leaflet for Parents

Language is one of the most important gifts you give your child. But how do you give it? The answer is simple. Speak your language with your child at home every day!

Many parents have recently reported that well-meaning staff in schools and pre-school settings had told them to speak English at home as it would help their children to settle in school and playgroups. Sounds familiar?

Another situation which has arisen is where a child arrives from another country to join their mother or father and a new English speaking step parent. The step parent can often be quite anxious for their new son or daughter to learn English as quickly as possible and the rule of English only within the home soon becomes established. Again, sounds familiar?

Where a family does not live near other families sharing their home language it can be especially difficult for parents to maintain and develop their children's home language skills. In Essex we have increasing numbers of speakers of particular languages who are beginning to find each other and establish regular opportunities to meet but this is not the case for many families living in rural communities and/or whose working circumstances mean that the time to meet socially with others who share their first language is very limited.

Why is home language important?

The language you speak with your children is the first language they will learn. It is their first connection to you, to the rest of their family, and to their culture and community. It is the language they first use to learn about the world around them. It is the language that helps them get "set for life"—and you are a central part of that process! This is one of the many ways parents are their children's first teachers.

What are the benefits of using your home language?

Using your home language connects your children to your family. It also provides a connection to your important cultural traditions, and to friends and neighbours who speak the same language. Using your home language allows you to teach your children, and to learn new things together. You can talk about new experiences and words; you can practise letters and numbers. All of these things are an important part of your children's early learning—and it will be easier and more fun for you if you do it in your most comfortable language.

But what about English?

Children living in the UK need English to succeed in school and in life. Fortunately, young children can easily become bilingual. A person who speaks more than one language well has more opportunities to study, travel, and work—both in the UK and across Europe/ the world. Important: Being bilingual also helps children build stronger thinking skills and usually results in better academic grades in the long term..

If I speak some English, should I use it at home?

You should speak the language you are most comfortable using. If your home language is stronger than your English, then you should use your home language with your children to build strong language skills.

Will my children get confused using two languages?

Young children can learn two or more languages at the same time. They learn quickly when they have lots of experiences with adults who speak with and listen to them. Sometimes children will combine words or phrases from both languages. That's OK! It may sound as though they are confused, but they are actually learning the rules and vocabulary from both languages and sorting them out in their brains. It is a sign of good learning and thinking.

My children prefer to speak English. What should I do?

First, don't worry. Maybe your children prefer English because that is what all of their friends are speaking. Talk with your children about language. Explain that learning both languages is important. Talk about the special people in their lives who speak your language, including favourite relatives and friends. Explain that people who are bilingual have twice as many chances to make friends and learn about new cultures.

Make your home language fun by reading books, singing songs, and playing games in it; and use it when you're involved in any kind of activity. Your language is a gift, and speaking it keeps your family connected!

Remember that your relationship with your children depends on language. As they get older, communication will become increasingly more important. You will have conversations about a wide variety of topics. This will be easier and more fun both you and your children if you are speaking the same language.

What can I do at home?

- Tell stories and read to your children in your home language.
- Share rhymes, chants, songs, and poems you learned as a child.
- Look for fun activities happening in your language, such as story time at your local library, local festivals and cultural events.
- Look for bilingual books, wordless books, or books in your home language at your nearest public library.

Stories in two languages

One of the best things you can do is to read with your child in the home language. Your nearest public library may have story books for children which have dual language text in English plus your home language. Your child's school may also have some of these.